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ABSTRACT

During the eighteenth century some colleges met the challenges to their purpose and survival by narrowing their focus and withdrawing their boundaries to more sectarian ground. Alternatively, it could be argued that a college could have met such challenges by broadening its focus and expanding its boundaries beyond insular denominational concerns. This latter course was the one taken by Harvard; but the choice was not easy, nor did it come quickly. This paper demonstrates Harvard's reaction to its students was as much a part of that decision process as was its reaction to the Revolution or the state constitutional convention. (Author/MJM)

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Freedom and Constraint in Eighteenth Century Harvard

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I

During the eighteenth century some colleges met the challenges to their purpose and survival by narrowing their focus and withdrawing their boundaries to more sectarian ground. Alternatively, it could be argued that a college could have met such challenges by broadening its focus and expanding its boundaries beyond insular denominational concerns. In fact, this latter course was the one taken by Harvard; but the choice was not easy, nor did it come quickly, nor indeed was the outcome predictable. Furthermore, as this paper will demonstrate, Harvard's reaction to its students was as much a part of that decision process as was its reaction to the Great Awakening, the Revolution or the state constitutional convention.

Some knowledge of earlier, seventeenth century student-college interaction at Harvard, as reflected in collegiate laws, customs and records of student misconduct, is essential.¹ The system of student discipline at Harvard developed as a support for the educational purpose of the college which was to train up a select group of young men to assume leadership roles in the ministry and magistracy of the Puritan Commonwealth of Massachusetts. In order to accomplish this, every aspect of student life was subject to scrutiny and close supervision by the college officials. Those students whose behavior did not conform to college laws and customs were disciplined in a manner which was chosen deliberately to reinforce the objectives of the college.

Insofar as the college social system was designed to express an idea, that idea was the same as for the larger society: persons in superior positions to oneself were to be revered and obeyed. Not only was the catechism of the Fifth Commandment applicable, but the college laws and customs also specifically stated this policy.

Thus, disrespect or rebellion greatly compounded the seriousness of any crime because it reflected the student's adverse attitude toward the college authorities. Perverseness, stubbornness or pride were particularly abhorrent to Puritan adults for such behavior revealed the student's sinful, wrathful inner state, the clear sign of an unregenerate soul.

Nevertheless, partly because of theological predispositions and partly because of the quasi-elect status of the students, much effort was expended in attempting to reform student offenders. Over time a fairly standardized ritual developed by which a student offender, regardless of his crime (above a certain minimum), could be examined "in all particulars," sentenced and punished. Usually the sentencing was a public event and was accompanied by the student's confession. If the confession were deemed sufficiently penitent, the original punishment was reduced or excused. Even students who were expelled could be (and were) readmitted upon petition and confession.

As far as can be determined by the records, cases of student misconduct in the 17th century were not numerous and were usually singular in nature in the sense that solitary students were convicted and, once punished, seldom repeated their offense or committed any other. Punishments reflected customary civil and ecclesiastic practice which consisted largely of shaming techniques such as admonition and confession. In the case of a particularly heinous crime such as fornication, theft or assault, the college officials resorted to corporal punishment or expulsion. Fines were used sparingly and for relatively minor offenses. In sum, student discipline was an integral part of the educative and socializing process in the college.

II

When John Leverett became president at the beginning of the eighteenth century, in 1708, he was fully cognizant of this system of discipline. Indeed, he had played an important role in perpetuating it during his long tenure as tutor and acting president from 1686 to 1697. Doubtless he expected the system to be carried forward virtually intact during his time as president. But as the "great riot" of 1708 quickly demonstrated,² "the new wine of the 18th century" was already pushing hard against the old bottles.³

Another measurable force that began to make a difference was the increase in enrollment which had been building slowly since 1686, but which took a sudden upturn in 1713. Morison noted its source and effect:

The increase came largely from the seaports which reaped the first harvests from land speculation and West Indian commerce, and the rum business; and where the influence of court manners was most quickly felt. The new crop of young men came to be made gentlemen, not to study.⁴

The impact of these new students and these rather different intentions was both immediate and cumulative. Characterized by one historian as "a weakening sense of sin,"⁵ the lawbreaking that occurred took forms rather different from what had been expressed in the previous century. First, there was an increase in the sheer numbers of misdemeanors. Second, there was more evidence of youthful high spirits such as parties and pranks. Third, there was an increase in the kinds of crimes which increasing affluence encouraged; namely, debauching and petty thefts. Finally, there was a greater incidence of group misconduct. The latter two forms will be commented on below.

Affluence manifested itself among the scholars in more attention to, and expenditures for, the items of a comfortable life. This included more and better clothing, books, sports equipment and supplementary condiments such as

wine and victuals.⁶ All of these items appear to have attracted the covetous eyes of college thieves. Moreover, beginning with Leverett's term, Harvard became increasingly more crowded, and as a result numerous students were obliged to live out while those who resided at the college were expected to double up. With the crowding, the affluence, and the greater numbers of students coming and going about the college residences, it was predictable that thefts would occur.

Debauchery of one sort or another was another manifestation of affluence. Students spent large amounts of time and money in drinking, eating and entertaining with others, male and female, both at college and off the premises. Drunkenness was rampant and other crimes fed upon it including fighting, lying, swearing and card playing. In the class of 1728, for example, 22 students were variously punished for "nocturnal expeditions" and "entertainments" beginning with stealing and roasting geese and ending with drunken routs.⁷ Gambling was the primary vice of the classes from 1731-40; over 85 students were convicted and punished for that crime alone.⁸ Over and above the students convicted of drinking and gambling, approximately 25 members of the classes of 1750-60 were convicted of misconduct in chapel, profaning the Sabbath and other impieties.⁹ Finally, several students of the class of 1766 and 1767 were sent home to be cured of "the Itch," the result of "associating with, countenancing, [and] encouraging one or more lewd women kept by the students."¹⁰ The students were restored after a mass confession on commencement eve.

Misconduct by groups of students was particularly unknown in the seventeenth century, in large part because the numbers of students remained so small. The largest classes before 1700 were those of 1690 and 1695, both of which numbered 22. However, "in November 1718, there were a hundred and twenty-four students in residence, including domini studying for the M.A. and other resident

graduates..."¹¹ This was by far the largest number of students ever to attend Harvard at one time. Enrollments stayed high until the Revolution began when they fell away significantly and did not pick up again until the 1780's.

With the increase in enrollment came an increase in the number of students participating in illegal group activities, referred to at the time as rous or riots. Most of these eighteenth century riots were prompted by Commencement revelries, Guy Fawkes' Day celebrations or bad food.¹² A famous one, the Bad Butter Rebellion of 1766, began as a complaint against bad food in Commons but escalated to a highly charged debate between the students, headed by the Governor's son, and the Board of Overseers, headed by the Governor, over the obligation to obey an unjust sovereign. The whole episode was shot through with obvious and ironic parallels with the rising political debates in the colony. In Harvard's case, the rebellion ended with a negotiated settlement in which the rebels signed a mass confession but received no other punishment.¹³

In addition to the increase in riots and rous, the records reveal that certain students repeated their crimes year after year and/or figured prominently in other misdeeds. Such repetitions and linkages indicate that from time to time cliques of students existed from whom much of the misconduct emanated. The members of these cliques often included the sons of the great families of Boston such as Winthrops, Brattles and Saltonstalls, as well as the sons of the newly rich merchants and traders. Together they were often called by the epithet, "Boston rakes and blades."¹⁴ Their notoriety was fostered not only by their lavish lifestyles but because they were ringleaders in many of the riots and other plots that were perpetrated during the century. For example, in 1720 a Winthrop and a Brattle were convicted with other young blades of taking part in a "great debauch" in one of the graduate's rooms.¹⁵ In 1735, the sons of a prominent colonel and a sea captain were the ringleaders of "the Gamesters

at Cards" referred to earlier.¹⁶ While in 1766, Nathaniel Sparhawk, whose father was a merchant and member of the Governor's Council, was convicted on two occasions for leading his classmates in disorderly behavior and "tumultuous noise."¹⁷

Not all the students participated in the general lawlessness. On occasion the more pious students banded together, "for mutual advancement in virtue and piety." These efforts were impelled in part, as Morison points out, by the need to protect themselves from the onslaughts and influence of their more licentious classmates' thievery and tormenting. As one such society stated in its preamble in 1728, "...whereas Vice is Now Become Alamode and Rant Riot and Excess is Accounted the Height of Good Breeding and Learning. In Order therefore to Stem That Monstrous Tide of Impiety & Ignorance, the Philomusarian Club is formed..."¹⁸ Beginning in 1748 students could volunteer to inform against profanity among their fellows, and in 1767 following the Bad Butter Rebellion a number of these "volunteers" formed the Association for the Suppression of Vice.¹⁹ A rough analysis of the membership of the volunteers indicates that approximately 50% became ministers, which is a greater percentage than in the general student body at the time.²⁰ This is not to say these students were invariably blameless, but they did seem to confine themselves to minor offenses such as cider parties and card playing. They also tended to be older and come from less affluent families. These poor and pious students comprised about one quarter to a third of any given class and were the ballast of the student body. In addition to volunteering for certain duties, they were also appointed and paid to monitor their classmates' attendance at college functions, and it is from their ranks that many tutors were drawn. They were, in many respects, the epitome of the seventeenth century ideal of the Harvard scholar.

We must ask why Harvard officials tolerated students whose purposes were

counter to their collegiate ideal and whose presence in sufficient numbers began to dominate and shift the character of the student body and thereby the college as a whole. The answer can be approached on two levels: first, from the perspective of the college vis-a-vis its external constituent environment, and second, from the perspective of its internal, educative environment.

In the face of this rising tide of lawlessness the college could have decided not to admit those who would be likely to commit such acts or, where forced to discipline students, could have made the punishments severe and permanent. Such strictness would have "purified the house" and returned it to its earlier, idealized character as a small but pious seminary much as Samuel Sewell or George Whitefield wanted and as Thomas Clap would attempt to create at Yale. The college had financial difficulties for most of the century, despite increased enrollment, but it is not clear that it had to admit everyone who applied. There is some evidence that certain families refused to send their sons because of the growing "bad reputation."²¹ We can assume, then, that Harvard might have gained financially if it had cracked down on the licentiousness and, by implication, the Boston rakes and blades, more severely. But the college did not elect that course. For the most part there was marked willingness to accept everyone who applied, particularly the sons of notable families, and to make every effort to see that the young men received their degrees, misdeeds to the contrary notwithstanding.

Leverett was a key figure in setting this course. Intellectually enlightened and theologically liberal, he "gloried in the fact that Harvard graduated not only learned ministers, but scholars, judges, physicians, soldiers..., merchants, and simple farmers..."²² Moreover, Leverett was thoroughly enmeshed in what has been called "the intercommunity of the learned," which bound the Harvard faculty and the Boston elite together with ties of

friendship, intellect, and shared interest, most important of which was Harvard itself.²³

Internally, however, matters were not so harmonious. It was one thing to associate with the refined and learned citizens of Boston but it was quite another to attempt to educate their wealthy, headstrong, and hellbent sons, particularly if the values and modes of inculcation had not changed appreciably from the time of the father's education. That is to say, although the college officials were willing to admit the "new crop" of young men, they expected to achieve their education in ways virtually unchanged from the premises of the previous century. Examples of this adherence to the old ways are evident in the cases of discipline. For example, in December 1714, Leverett recorded the following episode:

The Crimes of Moody and Gray junior sophisters were taken into Consideration . . . and after . . . Considerable debate upon what punishment Should be inflicted on the guilty Criminals, It was agreed . . . That Expulsion was the least and lowest manifestation by which the Corporation could show their resentments of the Outrage Committed by the Criminals . . . Mr. Flynt and Mr. Holioke declared they did not come up to Such Severity, but Submitted.²⁴

The following day the expulsion ceremony was carried out:

In the College Hall. The President after Morning Prayer, the Fellows Masters of Art, Bachelors of Art, and the Several Classes of the Undergraduates being present, after a full opening of the Crimes of Moody and Gray, a pathetic Admonition of them, and solemn obtestation of Expulsion against the said Moody and Gray, Order'd their Names to be rent of the Tables, and them to depart the Hall.²⁵

The proceeding against Moody and Gray is characteristic of previous times in two respects. First, and most important, the statement calling the expulsion "the least and lowest manifestation by which the Corporation could show their resentment of the Outrage Committed by Criminals," illustrates the continuing intimate tone of the indictments. "Resentment" and "outrage" are words which denote

rather personal emotions, and such diction implies that the students had violated the rules of a personal and privileged community, while the expulsion ceremony itself is virtually identical to those conducted forty and fifty years earlier.

The tension of transition is also evident in this particular case in that it was a crime committed by more than one scholar, and there is obvious evidence of debate among the officials, some of whom, Flynt and Holyoke, desired a more lenient punishment.²⁶

Another example of this desire to perpetuate earlier disciplinary forms occurred in 1761 when the Board of Overseers decided that the use of fines was not a sufficiently effective deterrent to crime, being primarily a tax on the parents rather than the students. They therefore decided to reduce the use of fines and to return to a greater use of public and private admonitions and confessions and notifications to parents.²⁷

As the previous case illustrates, the Board of Overseers was the principal policy-making body. During the eighteenth century it authorized several visitation committees from among its members to inspect all aspects of the college. Not infrequently policy (and practice) related to student discipline was affected. For example, in the summer of 1723, the Board of Overseers, spurred on by its more conservative members, decided "that a visitation of the College would very much serve the interests of religion and learning in that society."²⁸ Judge Sewall, Leverett's arch critic, was appointed chairman of the visitation committee which drew up ten articles proposing the matters to be investigated. Of these ten, "three had reference to the general conduct of the College; and seven, exclusive reference to its religious and moral condition; indicating very distinctly the points on which there existed, or there was a disposition to create, suspicions."²⁹ Specifically, Article 4 asked: "What is the state

of the College as to the morals of the youth..."³⁰

The committee made its visit immediately and reported its findings on October 9, 1723. Its conclusions regarding Article 4 were:

That although there is a considerable number of virtuous and studious youth in the College, yet there has been a practice of several immoralities; particularly stealing, lying, swearing, idleness, picking of locks, and too frequent use of strong drink; which immoralities, it is feared still continue in the College, notwithstanding the faithful endeavours of the rulers of the House to suppress them.³¹

From the catalogue of "immoralities" cited by the committee it would seem that Leverett had made his records available to them; they could not have observed all that activity in one visit. Moreover the committee was apparently unable to blame any of the college officers for failing to police the college. One wishes the committee had elaborated upon its conclusions as to the source of the immoralities. Was it imputed to the impious and unschooled background of the scholars, the temper of the times, or perhaps God's disfavor with the college and even the colony? No such imputations were made. However, the Overseers did appoint a new committee to undertake a revision of the college laws, doubtless in the hope that more stringent or more elaborate laws would help to remedy the situation. However, the revision was of no immediate help because it was continued intermittently for the next ten years before arriving at a final form.

The other item of interest to us here is the visitation committee's acknowledgement of the different population of students who inhabited the college. As the committee conceded, a "considerable number" of the students were "virtuous and studious," while the immoralities of the few were reasonably well constrained. Nevertheless, the committee in one of its other findings also noted that "the scholars too generall spend too much of Saturday evenings in one another's Chambers; and that the Freshmen, as well as others, are seen

in great numbers going into town, on Sabbath mornings, to provide breakfasts."³² What the committee undoubtedly was referring to was the enactment of one phase of the college customs, errand-running for the upperclassmen. However, it is indicative of the change in lifestyle of the entire society that the committee spoke so mildly about this custom which to their own fathers would have been a gross violation of the Sabbath.

In 1755 the Overseers again appointed a committee "to examine the students" regarding "great disorders . . . lately . . . committed." The committee condemned the students involved and refused to accept their appeals for restoration because "their petitions did not express a just sense of the evil nature and pernicious tendency of the crimes..."³³ This case is also an excellent example of the propensity of the Overseers to reach into the direct administration of the college. Such action was understandably the bane of the President and tutors on several occasions.

Taken from the perspective of the students, the persistent and increasing amount of illegal activity appears not to have been revolutionary in intent in the sense of being designed to overthrow the college government. Ordinarily the students did not challenge the right of the college to make laws governing their conduct, but rather acknowledged the existence of the laws by breaking them with regularity and holding the officials to their obligation to enforce the laws. Moreover, the students appear to have expected to render a certain accounting for their misconduct so long as it did not involve physical abuse or truly permanent exile and so long as their dignity was left reasonably intact. From the distance of two centuries this "silent agreement" takes on the outline of an elaborate game or ritual, the rules of which are revealed by their mockery or breach. For example, students who were expelled were customarily readmitted after a decent interval and a humble

petition. The day of return was often treated with mock ceremony by the students, and the culprit became the class hero. In another instance the "rules" of a criminal proceeding are revealed by the student who presented himself at chapel to be convicted and sentenced. The student thereupon rendered a "humble confession," but when his sentence was not mitigated as was the custom, he walked out.³⁴ Finally, there is the example of the Bad Butter Rebellion whereby a student committee and a college committee negotiated the terms of the settlement.³⁵

III

Historians have long pointed out that prosperity was one of the greatest forces for change in New England's Puritan society. Prosperity meant not only great wealth for a few families but also comfortable living for the many; it meant settled towns, permanent roads, bustling, growing populations, and relative security from Indians, starving times, and foreign persecutions, and by the end of the seventeenth century this time had arrived in Massachusetts. By the time of the election of John Leverett as President of Harvard in 1708, the effects of the new prosperity were also manifest in the college.

The dilemma posed for Leverett and his successors was this: they were appointed to uphold the philosophy of the college concerning piety and right conduct as well as liberal learning. Misconduct was to be taken seriously because of the implied challenge to the purposes and authority of the college. And discipline, when it followed, was designed deliberately to right the balance back toward the college goals. The increase in the number of students and acts of misconduct was evidence that a sufficiently large and continuous student subculture had grown up as a counter force to the immediate government

and traditional purposes. The presence of this "counterculture," if you will, did much to set the tone of college life for the students who participated in it and much to set the limits of freedom and constraint in which the college and all its members shared. By the midpoint of the century this student culture had become a principal if not predominant force. Such influence was tolerated for reasons which set Harvard apart from the general trend toward a narrowly secular and pious education.

NOTES

1. Kathryn M. Moore, "Old Saints and Young Sinners: A Study of Student Discipline at Harvard College 1636-1724." (Unpublished dissertation: University of Wisconsin, 1972). See also Clifford K. Shipton, Sibley's Harvard Graduates I-XVII (Boston: Massachusetts Historical Society 1935-1975); S. E. Morison, Harvard College in the Seventeenth Century and Three Centuries of Harvard (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1936), and Josiah Quincy, History of Harvard University, 2 vols. (Cambridge: John Owen, 1840).
2. Shipton, Sibley's Harvard Graduates, V, p. 475.
3. Ibid., IV, pp. 36-37.
4. Morison, Three Centuries, p. 60.
5. Henry Bamford Parkes, "Morals and Law Enforcement in Colonial New England," New England Quarterly, V, 3, pp. 431-452.
6. Margery Somers Foster, "Out of Smalle Beginnings...: An Economic History of Harvard College in the Puritan Period, 1636-1712." (Cambridge: Belknap Press, 1962).
7. Shipton, Sibley's Harvard Graduates, VIII, pp. 70, 386, et passim.
8. Ibid., IX and X.
9. Ibid., XIII, XIV.
10. Ibid., XVI, pp. 487-88.
11. Morison, Three Centuries, p. 59.
12. See Morison, Three Centuries, also A.M. Bevis, Diets and Riots: An Interpretation of the History of Harvard University (Boston: Marshall Jones Co., 1936).
13. Shipton, Sibley's Harvard Graduates, XVI, pp. 442, 486-87, et passim.
14. Morison, Three Centuries; also Moore, "Old Saints."
15. Shipton, Sibley's Harvard Graduates, VII, pp. 10-11, 446 et passim.
16. Ibid., IX, pp. 606, 612.
17. Ibid., XVI, p. 234.
18. Ibid., p. 62.
19. Shipton, Sibley's Harvard Graduates, XII, XVI.

20. See Lawrence Cremin, American Education: The Colonial Experience (New York: Harper and Row, 1970), p. 554.
21. Shipton, Sibley's Harvard Graduates, XII, p. 41.
22. Morison, Three Centuries, p. 60.
23. Seymour Martin Lipset and David Riesman, Education and Politics at Harvard, Part I, (New York: McGraw-Hill, forthcoming), p. 83.
24. Shipton, Sibley's Harvard Graduates, VI, p. 145.
25. Ibid.
26. Holyoke became president in 1637. He served for 32 years and died in office. He was noted for his leniency toward students who were even more active than Leverett's.
27. Quincy, History of Harvard, II, pp. 135-136.
28. Ibid., p. 317.
29. Ibid.
30. Ibid.
31. Ibid., p. 319.
32. Ibid., p. 320.
33. Ibid., pp. 90-92.
34. Shipton, Harvard Graduates, XVI, pp. 389-390, also XVI, pp. 33-34, XV, pp. 153-154, and XII, pp. 112-113.
35. Ibid., XVI, pp. 442, 486-87.